

# A VIEW OF THE PAST

## The Second Decade (1973–1982)

by Patricia Sullivan

**I**N THIS ISSUE WE CONTINUE OUR SPECIAL SECTION, “A VIEW OF THE PAST,” written in celebration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *English Teaching Forum*. This special section gives us the opportunity to reflect on the past and to revisit theoretical perspectives and classroom practices that are still relevant today.

This issue features articles from the second decade of the *Forum* (1973–1982). In this decade we notice two recurring themes. The first concerns the meaning of linguistic competence, and the second relates to the effectiveness of language teaching methods. It is not surprising that these were major concerns. At that time the notion of communicative competence was still new, and innovative approaches to language teaching were burgeoning (for example, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning). In many of the articles published during this ten-year period, teachers and researchers present techniques that encourage conversation rather than recitation, activities that incorporate student-student interaction, contextualization that reflects the real world, and exercises that teach pronunciation meaningfully. Also, articles on English for Specific Purposes began to appear in the pages of the *Forum*.

The four excerpts that follow reflect common themes of the decade.<sup>1</sup> Prator proposes a new attitude toward teaching and presents ten slogans that are not dependent on a single teaching method or approach. Via offers the “talk and listen” technique, which is based on the training of professional actors, for enhancing conversational dialogues. Finocchiaro focuses on the importance of functions of language, varieties of language, and sociocultural factors as they relate to language learning and teaching. And finally, Celce-Murcia describes a procedure for correcting grammar exercises that involves students working in small groups.

We hope you find these ideas as thought provoking today as they were when they were first published.

1. The complete texts of these four articles can be found in the on-line version of the *Forum* at <http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/>.



We have to do  
with the past  
only as  
we can make it  
useful  
to the present  
and the future.



**FREDERICK DOUGLASS**  
American abolitionist  
(1817-1895)

# IN SEARCH OF A METHOD

Clifford H. Prator

1976 • U S A

This article was published in the January 1976 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 2–8).

The present may well be one of the most unusual periods the twentieth century has seen in the development of methods of language instruction. It is probably the time when there is least agreement as to what method should be preferred. One method has succeeded another: grammar-translation gave way to the direct method, which was in turn followed by the reading approach. The audio-lingual approach enjoyed almost uncontested supremacy in many parts of the world, through the 1950s and 1960s. But no more...

In the past, when a widely accepted method has been challenged, those who did the challenging usually had a new method that they felt confident was superior to the old one. What is different about the present state of affairs is that no one has as yet proposed a new method, fully formulated, coherent, and sufficiently in harmony with generative-transformational linguistics and cognitive psychology to win wide acceptance....

Could we perhaps succeed quite well without basing our work on any one consistent theory of language analysis and language acquisition? Many of us have concluded that the answer to the last question has to be "yes." It appears to us that the wisest course of action under present circumstances is to concern ourselves less with theory and more with finding out what techniques succeed best with our students. What we have in mind is nothing so formal as a method or so well developed as an approach. It might be more accurate to think of it simply as an attitude toward language teaching. The chief purpose of this article is to try to spell out some of the possible implications of such an attitude. For the sake of clarity, I would like to discuss these implications within the framework of ten slogans:

- Teaching is more of an art than a science.
- No methodologist has the whole answer.
- Try to avoid the pendulum syndrome.
- Place a high value on practical experimentation without doctrinaire allegiance.
- Look to various relevant disciplines for insights.
- View objectives as an overriding consideration.
- Regard all tested techniques as resources.
- Attach as much importance to what your students say as to how they say it.
- Let your greatest concern be the needs and motivation of your students.
- Remember that what is new is not necessarily better.

**1. Teaching is more of an art than science.** Language teaching has always been, and remains, more of an art than a science. That is to say, it is largely intuitive and dependent on the personal abilities and convictions of the teacher. It appears that most of a teacher's success is the result of such qualities as enthusiasm, intelligence, and love for students.

**2. No methodologist has the whole answer.** Language teachers have tended to allow themselves to be too easily influenced by methodologists and linguists. The present seems an excellent time to cultivate the skepticism with which we ought to consider all new methodological proposals. There is no one method, eternal and immutable, to be discovered.

**3. Try to avoid the pendulum syndrome.** We have seen that one strongly recommended method or approach has succeeded another at relatively short intervals and that the proponents of each have tended to deny the validity of all that preceded. For example, the use of the mother tongue in the foreign language classroom has been successively emphasized, banned, required, and barely tolerated. It is the tendency to swing from one extreme of opinion to the other that I refer to here as the "pendulum syndrome." In retrospect it is easy to see that anyone affected by the syndrome must have been entirely wrong a large part of the time.

**4. Place a high value on practical experimentation without doctrinaire allegiance.** Our first point, that teaching is more of an art than a science, should not be interpreted as meaning that we can afford to neglect research and experimentation.

**5. Look to various relevant disciplines for insights.** Surely, linguistics is not the only discipline to which we should look for insights. It is as important for us to understand the nature of our students as it is to understand the nature of language. We therefore have much to learn from psychology, the discipline which studies how language is acquired and the personal variables that may affect its acquisition....

**8. Attach as much importance to what your students say as to how they say it.** There is increasing evidence and a growing belief among educators that one of the best ways of learning English is to use it extensively in studying some other subject or for some practical purpose. It is certainly possible to provide some meaningful content in even an elementary language class. We can find ways to encourage our students to talk and write about the things that interest them most. And we should think of language instruction not as an isolated subject but as an integral element in a total curriculum.

**9. Let your greatest concern be the needs and motivation of your students.** We must not forget that students are more important than methods. Much of the time that has been spent in considering theoretical questions of methodology might have been better spent in trying to discover precisely what language skills our students will find most useful after they finish our classes. What is to prevent us in our English classes from giving them experience in actually doing some of these things?

**10. Remember that what is new is not necessarily better.** Though we have raised serious questions regarding the audio-lingual approach, we have not rushed to replace it by some other method, and that is perhaps a sign of our growing maturity.

# TALK AND LISTEN

Richard A. Via

U S A • 1977

This article was published in the April 1977 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 22–23).

To enhance a conversation class, teachers of English can make use of an effective technique that professional actors employ to develop a conversational tone and to aid them in learning their lines. In the theater the technique has no name, but I have dubbed it “talk and listen,” for that is what the method calls for.

## Advantages of this technique

There are many values in using the “talk and listen” system with students of English. It can train them to listen, it can help them learn dialogues, it can help them develop a conversational tone (talking rather than reciting), and not last (for there are still other values) nor least—“talk and listen” is fun.

Let me make a few useful observations about listening. A good actor, like a good conversationalist, must be a good listener. By listening an actor can judge how he needs to respond. The way something is said to a performer (or anyone) affects the way the other performer responds. For a language learner the same holds true. Listening provides the learner with added opportunity to pick up a needed word or phrase to use in his reply.

By talking to another actor, rather than merely reading the part, the actor or conversationalist becomes more interesting—the difference between reading and talking is tremendous. Yet in most classroom situations dialogues are read aloud rather than spoken as conversation....

## How to do it

Perhaps the best way to start students on the “talk and listen” system is to use “talk and listen” cards. First, choose or write a simple dialogue of six to eight lines. Then put the lines that A speaks on one card and those of B on another, like this:

A: Why do you always do that?  
B: \_\_\_\_  
A: You know. What you're doing now.  
B: \_\_\_\_  
A: Oh no, not at all.  
B: \_\_\_\_

A: \_\_\_\_  
B: Do what?  
A: \_\_\_\_  
B: Why? Does it bother you?  
A: \_\_\_\_  
B: Then why did you ask?

Since A speaks first, A reads his first line to himself.<sup>1</sup> (B does not look at his card yet, but waits for A to speak to him.) A then makes eye contact with B and says his first line to B. When A has finished speaking, B reads the first line on his card to himself, then looks up and says it to A. The entire dialogue is done this way. The students may refer to their cards as often as necessary, but whenever someone is speaking there must be eye contact. When one student is speaking, the other one should not be reading his lines, trying to learn them, or planning how to say them; he should be listening to the

speaker. He can give a proper response only if he has been listening. When using a dialogue from a textbook or a play, the student should be careful not to read the line that is being spoken to him. In most cases a student who reads the line that is being spoken to him will hear his own “inner voice” with its interpretation louder than the real voice of the speaker.

## A useful precaution

If you should notice that students are making eye contact but are not listening, put two sets of dialogues on the cards. This will require listening to elicit a sensible dialogue. For example:

A: It was good to see you yesterday.  
or  
Did you know I was going to Detroit?  
A: Yeah, I'm going to Detroit.  
or  
It was a good party, wasn't it?  
A: Permanently. I'm moving there.  
or  
Are you going to the picnic Saturday?  
A: It should be fun.  
or  
No, I'll miss this place.

B: No, I didn't.  
or  
It was good to see you, too.  
B: Oh, it was O.K.  
or  
For how long?  
B: Oh, not on a vacation?  
or  
I'm not sure.  
B: We'll miss you, too.  
or  
Well, I'll try to go.

## Further possibilities

Once the students have learned to use the cards, there are other things you can do that are both fun and effective. Speaking the lines in different natural tones or speeds will show how language can change in meaning or feeling. The greatest change and the most fun occurs when you give the circumstances surrounding the situation. By this I mean the who, where, what, when—anything that might control the way the sentences are spoken. Every dialogue changes according to these circumstances, yet rarely do teachers think to add them.

For example, in the first dialogue above how would the lines be spoken if:

- A and B are a married couple watching TV. B keeps changing channels.
- A and B are parent and child. B, the child, is biting his fingernails.
- A and B are lovers. B is stroking A's hair.

The dialogues for “talk and listen” may be written by the teacher, taken from textbook dialogues, or selected from suitable plays. The class may be divided into pairs using different cards or the same cards, with each pair deciding on the given circumstances. After working together on the dialogues these pairs could present them in front of the class for all to enjoy. More than likely after working on the dialogues they will know the lines and not need the cards. In case they have not learned them, let them refer to the cards rather than memorize the lines.

1. Though the use of his and him to refer to either male or female is inappropriate by today's standards, we chose to keep the author's original words from 1977.

# DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Mary Finocchiaro

1977 • U S A

This article was published in the April 1977 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 2–7).

Communicative competence, the language-learning objective that has gained increasing currency in the United States during the past several years, has become, like the weather, a subject of endless discussions. The problem is that everyone talks or writes about it but little has come out of all this that can be used, particularly in countries where English is taught as a foreign language....

I am reaffirming here what has been said numerous times: the language program should take into account the cognitive and sociocultural needs of the students; the community in which the school is located; the training, language ability, and personality of the teacher; and the present and foreseeable future needs of the society in which our learners live....

Today the term *communicative competence* has added important dimensions to the two previous concepts [competence and performance]. Since, as anthropologists and sociologists have pointed out, oral communication takes place in a definite sociolinguistic situation, both linguistic and extralinguistic factors must be considered. Not only will linguistic forms vary in meaning in different contexts, but the units of discourse into which the forms are integrated must be appropriate to and acceptable in the social situations in which they are used. Extralinguistic factors, such as the social roles of the participants in a conversation and the place and time of the communication act, will determine to a large extent the form, tone, and appropriateness of any oral or written message.... While communicative behavior is always situationally conditioned and therefore subject to infinite variations, I should like to single out three factors that underlie any speech act: (1) the functions that language serves in real-world everyday use, (2) the varieties of language possible within each of the functions, and (3) the shared sociocultural allusions (which some writers have called presuppositions) necessary to a complete understanding of the acceptability or appropriateness of oral or written messages. Let us examine these variables, each of which has important implications for teaching and learning.

## The Functions of Language

We generally distinguish five principal functions of language: personal, interpersonal, directive, referential, and imaginative. The *personal* function refers to the speaker's or writer's ability to express his innermost thoughts as well as the gamut of emotions—love, joy, disappointment, distress, anger, sorrow—which every human being experiences. The *interpersonal* function enables us to establish and mediate desirable social and working relationships. This category would include expressions of sympathy, joy at another's success, concern for other people's welfare, the making or breaking of appointments, the appropriate language needed to indicate agreement or disagreement which we use in everyday situations and which helps make living with others possible

and pleasant. The language used in the *directive* function, enabling us to make requests or suggestions, to persuade or convince, should also be presented and learned in incremental steps. The *referential* function of language—the one that has been most frequently practiced in language classes in the past—is concerned with talking or writing about the immediate environment and about language itself. (Some writers call this latter function the *metalinguistic* function.) The *imaginative* function refers, of course, to the ability to compose rhymes, poetry, essays, or stories orally or in writing. This function should be encouraged if the learner seems to possess creative talent. But I am not sure that truly imaginative writing can be taught unless the learner has a genetic predisposition for it.

## The Varieties of Language

The functions are simple enough, but the varieties of language that can be used within each function may sometimes obscure the message or render it totally inappropriate in a particular social situation. Language varieties are generally conditioned by three principal factors: geographical factors, as in the case of dialects; social factors, which relate to social class, status, and educational background; and the factors that underlie the several elements contained in the term *registers*. This term is used to describe language that varies according to the formality or informality of the situation, the work or profession under discussion, and the mode—written or oral—of the discourse....

## Sociocultural Factors

While the linguistic forms within each of the functions and varieties could undoubtedly be taught over a period of time, depending on the learner's age and language level and the teacher's skill, research studies in several countries have raised grave doubts as to the ability of foreign language learners to acquire enough knowledge about historical events, geography, and the culture of the target-language country to participate fully in a conversation. One study indicates that even after living in a country for thirty years, the average immigrant does not understand facts stemming from social or cultural factors or events in which he has not been intimately involved. He may misunderstand or ascribe a mistaken value to a portion of an oral or written communication, simply because he has not shared the experience of the speaker or writer. Extralinguistic factors, such as gestures and facial expressions, are especially difficult to decipher....

It seems ironic that the foundations on which the goal of communicative competence has been built have not been given enough attention in discussions of this subject. Communicative competence is concerned with the who, when, where, what, and why of language use. We cannot ignore these questions when we urge teachers to accept communicative competence as the primary goal of language learning....



# GROUP WORK WITH GRAMMAR TEACHING

Marianne Celce-Murcia

U S A • 1980

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For some time teachers have been using the group-work technique because it helps to establish a good classroom climate. In many classes group work has been used to stimulate oral communication centered around problem-solving or role-playing. It has also been used as a pre-writing activity and for peer correction of compositions.

There are several reasons for my integrating the teaching of grammar and the group-work technique in classes with students at the high-intermediate or advanced level. First, priority is given to problems in written work, since the students' oral communication is usually adequate, and their written errors seem more glaring and obvious than their spoken errors. Secondly, I feel that written errors are easier for these students to learn to monitor and correct than errors they commit in speech. Finally, I believe that the group-work technique achieves three important goals: (1) it creates a good social climate with opportunities for student-student interaction; (2) it contributes to the remediation of some persistent grammatical errors; and (3) it gives the students the tools they need to continue improving their English after they have completed the course.

## Procedure

The procedure that I follow is described below:

**STEP 1:** Identify a common problem, for example, article usage.

**STEP 2:** Conduct a conventional review. This could be a brief lecture or a reading assignment from a textbook.

**STEP 3:** Distribute take-home exercises. Exercises adapted or taken from existing texts are usually adequate at this stage if they are contextualized. For article usage, a cloze passage can be prepared with these instructions: Fill in the blanks with a/an/some/the. If an article is not needed, leave the space blank.

**STEP 4:** The teacher prepares the class for group work. Going over ten sample items with the whole class gives the students some idea of how to correct and how to interact during their group exercise.

**STEP 5:** In groups of four or five students per group, students compare their responses and discuss items if there is disagreement. They give the teacher their consensus answers on a clean exercise sheet that the teacher has given to the recorder in each group.

**STEP 6:** The teacher corrects group responses, gives feedback to the entire class, pinpoints residual problems, and provides some oral drills to practice the correct forms.

**STEP 7:** Follow-up written exercises are assigned to deal with the residual problems. For the lesson on article usage, I distributed a composition that incorpo-

rated most of the residual errors, and each student was asked to correct the errors in article usage as homework.

**STEP 8:** Group work again (as in Step 5, with Step 4 as preparation if necessary).

**STEP 9:** The teacher corrects (as in Step 6) with more grammar drill if necessary.

**STEP 10:** The students write their next composition, focusing on accuracy in article usage. They are given time to recheck their compositions for errors in article usage. The teacher gives special attention to article usage in grading the composition.

**STEP 11:** Articles are later tested along with other points of grammar as part of a larger quiz or examination.

There are a number of important considerations involved in implementing such a procedure. First of all, to ensure its effectiveness, students must complete their written exercises before coming to class. The teacher should check quickly for completion of work and penalize those who have come unprepared before setting up the groups.

Secondly, to ensure efficient group work, the class as a whole should stimulate the group correction process with a written exercise under the teacher's guidance. The teacher should set up the groups in advance, and each group should have an assigned leader and recorder. (This assignment changes each time so that all students do these jobs.) Moreover, the teacher will have prepared small signs to post in the areas where group work will be done—each sign indicates the membership of the group and designates the leader and the recorder. Furthermore, it is best if the composition of the group changes from one session to another so that students have optimum exposure to each other in small, cordial groups.

Like any other good procedure or activity, group work can be overused. Students get annoyed or bored if put too frequently into small groups; then all of the advantages associated with doing group work are eliminated. Group work must be used as one of several learning situations: (a) the teacher with the whole class, (b) each student doing a task independently, (c) one or more students in charge of the whole class, (d) students working in pairs, etc. The teacher must also be careful to pace group work so that it doesn't drag. A reasonable amount of time for completion of the group's task should be specified before the group work starts. The teacher should move around the class to see how the groups are progressing and should urge them to speed up if they are moving too slowly.

There are pros and cons to using such a procedure even if it is used with optimum frequency and paced properly. The obvious advantages are that most students enjoy such an interactional approach to learning grammar and that the teacher corrects four or five exercises instead of twenty or twenty-five. The most convincing argument in favor of the procedure, however, is that most students demonstrate marked improvement in later compositions and on quizzes and exams....